



LITERARY HISTORY OF THE CARIBBEAN ISLANDS

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a culminating effort to illuminate the contributions made by the progenies of Indian and African indenture to the history of literature in the Caribbean. These writers of the Indian and African descent bring to bear on the most salient issues of physical toil, economic hardship, pain, frustration, uncertainty and entrapment encountered by their forefathers. Their works procure the history and construction of racial inequality in Caribbean colonization. According to the Britannica, "the literature of Caribbean has no indigenous tradition". Initially the Caribbean had 'oral tradition' which gradually faded away. Later the African who were brought as slaves also had the same tradition of 'orality'. Even they could not add to the Caribbean tradition as they suffered in bondage. The Indians who replaced the Africans in 1930s brought their rich culture and tradition with them. The Africans passed on their culture of orality and Indians passed on their rich culture and tradition. These together with the conventions of the European colonizers comprised the Caribbean literature.

KEY WORDS: Colonialism, Postcolonialism, Indenture, Immigrants, Identity.

INTRODUCTION:

Caribbean literature is a genre fast catching on in intellectual and fictional arenas. Caribbean literature is growing in a fresh and exhilarating way: innovative work from the first generation of canonical writers persists to be bright and astounding, reflecting an assortment of literary, cultural and linguistic manipulations. A rising body of literature from the Caribbean diaspora adds new magnitude to notions of a Caribbean individuality and to literary depictions of time, place and space. The 'doubly Commonwealth' status Caribbean-Canadian literary culture provides a productive soil to reconstruct common themes of exile, hybridity and the longing for home. As well as reflecting these more general 'postcolonial' issues, Caribbean literature defines and satirizes its own deep-rooted themes and conventions of migration.

Mariam Pirbhai has described the literature written by people who had migrated from their homeland in the following words:

"Literary works that have emerged from people whose migration history can be traced back to the era of indentured labour accordingly warrant an appreciation and awareness of the British 'imperial century'. This is a loosely interconnected body of writing bound in colonial history and the vocabulary of indenture. This involves the semiotic and mythic nomenclature of indenture history as a shared experience of travel, transplantation, and resettlement in plantation estate 'logies', or the make shift housing of the plantation colony; the quotidian rites and rituals of cultural and material survival within the restrictive boundaries of the plantation economy; the poetics of survival embedded in 'immigrant success stories'...

(Pirabhai 20-21)

Migration carries with it issues of identity and rootlessness, cultural and traditional disparities and adaptation. Emigrant writers deal with the dilemma of dislocation, about self and home, and the psychosomatic, social and political effects of estrangement. The Caribbean voices are pouring forth the love and strains of nostalgia for the remembered native. The contemporary novelists tread new paths and this shows the vitality of the Caribbean fiction.

Caribbeans boast of eminent writers who have made a mark not just in their country but the world over. The most famous among the Caribbean writers are V.S. Naipaul, Kenneth Ramchand, Earl Lovelace, George Lamming, Lakshmi Persaud, David Dabydeen, Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite, Kwame Dawes, Michael Gilkes, Wilson Harris, Roy Heath, Kendel Hippolyte, Louis James, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Eusi Kwayana, George Lamming, Ian McDonald, Mark McWatt, Mervyn Morris, Grace Nichols, Gordon Rohlehr, Andrew Salkey, Harold Sonny, Ladoo, Michael Antony, Sam Selvon all together with their education at home and their sojourns abroad, this generation contended the empire and Englishness, and their writing typically negotiates post-coloniality. However most of these writers have looked-and-relocated- to the United States or England.

Caribbean literature is mainly a 'gripe literature'. This means, almost all the literary figures from the island represented themselves as 'conduit' and

insisted on social and economic revival and also resurgence of the country. This very outlook accepted by the literary figures of Caribbean after independence from colonial rule was very apt and appropriate. For a weary and browbeaten nation does need vigorous, rationally, sharp and clairvoyant leadership for nation building process. The Caribbeans had encountered the colonial rule with resilience and heaved out liberty from the European rule. Since then African literature has been at the forefront protesting against internal rifts and misgivings among the Caribbeans themselves.

Since ages women have been producing rich oral tradition in the form of folk ballads, fairy tales, songs and idioms which have yielded a different set of vocabulary and phraseology. Hence women writers works resulted in a deviation from the conventional literary language. Their appearance on the literary façade made them examine the terms and conditions that constructed their identity. Women writers were never encouraged in literary field. But they took the challenge and a firm ground for bold stance and came up and projecting the social and cultural ethos of their period imparting to the historical meaningfulness of the moment. As Simon De Beauvoir says,

Much more interesting are the insurgent females who have is unjust society; a literature of protest can engender sincere and powerful society." (718)

Traditionally the works of many women novelists have explored the female subjectivity in order to establish an identity that is not imposed by a patriarchal society. The theme of growing up from childhood to womanhood, that is the bildungsroman, is a recurrent strategy.

Seepersad Naipaul:

Seepersad Naipaul (1906—1953) was a writer of Indo-Trinidadian heritage. He was the father of V.S. Naipaul and married into the rich Capildeo family. Seepersad Naipaul worked as a journalist on the Trinidad Guardian. His only book, *"The Adventures of Gurudeva"*, is a collection of linked short stories that was first published in Trinidad in 1943 after his death. He desperately wanted to see his son become a writer.

Shiv Naipaul:

Shiva Naipaul (1945-1985), younger brother of the Nobel laureate V. S. Naipaul, was born in Port of Spain, Trinidad. He married in 1967 and had one son. He wrote fiction and non-fiction, the most well-known of the latter being *"North of South"*, the story of his remarkable journey through the new liberated Africa. His other famous literary works were *Black and White*, *Fireflies*, *A Hot Country*, *Beyond the Dragon's Mouth: Stories and Pieces*, *The Chip Chip Gatherers*. Shiva Naipaul won the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize and the Winifred Holtby Prize. He died in 1985 aged only forty.

V.S. Naipaul:

V.S. Naipaul was born in a poor Brahmin family on 17th August 1932 in Chaguanas, a village in Trinidad. His maternal grandfather had been shipped as an indentured laborer in Trinidad owing to the impoverished condition of India during the colonial period. During this period a major wave of indentures landed from India as a result of classic entrepreneur-

ship.

Naipaul was an atheist. His childhood was not a happy period of his life. His parents often quarreled among themselves. His mother's side were rich orthodox Hindus while his father, a renowned journalist was modernizing and critical. He was very much influenced by his father who actually introduced him to real literature and encouraged him to become a writer.

Naipaul himself was logical, coherent, materialist, a die-hard believer in Western individualism and cynicism, poignantly drawn towards Indian fatalism, considering its submissive and philosophical ideology of the world as chimera. He created his own unique blend of fiction, reportage and autobiography through his own personal experience as an expatriate first in Trinidad, then in England and then never really stable at any particular place. This experience actually contributed to his major fictions especially, *A House for Mr Biswas*, and other novels with themes of restlessness, discontent, emigrating people in a world full of rapid social, cultural and political changes, the process of decolonization in India, Africa and the Caribbean islands and racial conflicts. His narratives move around almost the same places in all his novels i.e. either in India, Africa, the Caribbean islands or England scrutinizing, revisiting and analyzing the changes with always a new perspective.

Naipaul often found himself caught between the oppressions of colonialism and the chaos of postcolonialism. This was because of his unhappy childhood experiences. He could not forget his early impoverished days of childhood spent among the homeless Hindi speaking Indo-Trinidadians who slept with and woke up with the hope to return some day to their native land. His literary works are sprinkled with his childhood experiences of restricted, demarcated, atrocious existence which encased him with colonial Trinidad with its narrow range of career, tarnished political sleaze, ethnic and religious divergence. He felt that traditional Indian culture was crumbling, its customs and practices, rites and rituals all seemed misfit in Trinidad and on way to extinction. The Indians amidst whom they lived never tried to assimilate with other races. The African, on the other hand, had no traditional culture of their own and blindly imitated the Europeans. The humiliations that they encountered at the hands of the Europeans only resulted in resentment, a brotherhood of skin, colour and fantasies of deliverance. Naipaul disapproves all these and his perspective is a consequence of the humiliation of his youth; it is even influenced by his perception of the Indian ethnicity and the mortifications India and Indians have suffered. India's flaws transported the Indians around the world as indentured, and led to the forced desertion of Indians in the black dominated Caribbean islands. All this was expressed in his literary works that dealt with the condition of India and diasporic Indians, of which he himself is a part. As King Alvin Bruce writes,

Naipaul wanted to escape and had his own fantasies of being one of the early Aryan horsemen who conquered India and created its great Sanskrit culture. (8)

Naipaul in his novels focuses on individuals creating self-identity and moving in life ahead with autonomy in society unlike the contemporary writers who concentrated on ideas and groups. His works are representative of major social, psychological, political and cultural changes in our time. He writes about political decolonization and its corollaries, the exodus of people, the unanimous and desperate longing for the luxuries of modern society and also the indignation of those sharing similar longings but whose cultures are threatened by modernity. Naipaul's novels are generally autobiographical, based on facts, familiar people and events. About Naipaul's first three novels, *The Mystic Masseur* published in 1957, *The Sufferage of Elvira* in 1958, and *Miguel Street* in 1959, Alvin Bruce says,

While Naipaul's first three books of fiction are extraordinarily popular because of their comedy, implicit are such themes as the way impoverished, hopeless lives and the chaotic mixing of cultures result in fantasy, brutality, violence and corruption. The three books are social history showing the start of protest politics during the late 1930s and how Trinidad began to change during and after the second World War. (King23)

V.S. Naipaul's relationship with his native land or his land of birth or even with the land where he finally settled is somewhat ambiguous. He never felt at home with any of these lands; instead he experienced a profound alienation. Alvin Bruce says about his stay in England:

For his first twenty years in England he never felt at home and is still aware of himself as an outsider. As he is from the Asian Indian minority in black dominated Trinidad his perspective on decolonization, imperialism, black-white relations and other themes of post imperial literature is more complicated than that of nationalist and their foreign sympathizers. (3)

About India V.S. Naipaul writes in his book *Writers and the World: Essays* says,

Neither this nor that, we are so often told, is the 'real' India. And how well one begins to understand why the word is used! Perhaps India is only a word, a

mystical idea that embraces all those vast rivers and plains through which the train moves, all those anonymous figures asleep on railway platforms and the footpaths of Bombay, all those poor fields and stunted animals, all this exhausted and plundered land. Perhaps it is this, this vastness which no one can ever get to know: India is an ache, for which one as a great tenderness, but from which at length one always wishes to separate oneself. (7)

V.S. Naipaul in *The Middle Passage* revealing his apprehensions associated with home, says,

"I had never wanted to stay in Trinidad... for many years afterwards in England, falling asleep in bedsitters with the electric fire on, I had been awakened by nightmare as back in tropical Trinidad. I Knew Trinidad to be unimportant, uncreative, cynical. Every person of eminence was held to be crooked and contemptible. In my novels I had only expressed this fear; and it is only now, at the moment of writing that I am able to attempt to examine it." (43)

Graham Huggan writes about Naipaul in the following manner:

"The illusory search for detachment continues in Naipaul's second Indian narrative, *India: A wounded Civilization*. Continuing in the vein of *An Area of Darkness*, but raising critique to the level of hysteria, *India: A Wounded Civilization* launches a savage attack on the lassitude of (post-) Gandhian India, a country that continues to refuse to face up to its problems, that persists in deferring to the authority of others." (143)

These are partly autobiographical. They are travel narratives. He writes about his experiences during his visit to India. Here Naipaul is deeply concerned with the drives of the Indian civilization and culture. The India in *An Area Of Darkness* portrays India in consistent and spectacular state of decay. He criticizes the Indian people as 'degraded' and 'stupefied', the buildings in India "hint at the imminence of their own destruction" (216). He visits India to find his lost self. He suffers badly from the tension between identification and alienation, between belonging or not belonging. The final impression that he carries is that 'old India' has crumbled and 'new India' is a mixture of pride and pretensions, sensibility and brutality, incompetence and inefficiency. The India he saw was "like an onion with one skin after another of pretense- at the heart- negation, nothing". (Pritchett 361)

Finally, about India Naipaul says,

India had not worked its magic on me. It remained the land of my childhood, an area of darkness; like the Himalayan passes, it was closing up again, as fast as I withdrew from it, into a land of myth; it seemed to exist in just the timelessness which I had imagined as a child, into which, for all that I walked on Indian earth, I knew I could not penetrate. (*An Area of Darkness* 266)

India: A Wounded Civilization is nothing but a complement to *An Area of Darkness*. Here he is more involved and more critical of everything Indian. This is clear by the way he describes India:

"No civilization was so little equipped to cope with the outside world; no country was so easily raided and plundered and learned so little from its disasters." (*India A Wounded Civilization* viii)

He further writes in *India A Wounded Civilization*:

The crisis of India is not only political or economic. The larger crisis of a wounded old civilization that has at last become aware of its inadequacies and is without the intellectual means to move ahead. (9)

A House for Mr Biswas is Naipaul's masterpiece. It is a tragicomedy, in search for autonomy, independence and identity. It is an autobiographical novel in fact based on Naipaul's Brahmin Indian family in Trinidad.

The themes of his novels are varied, some of them related to the plight of Hindus in the West Indies troubled with Christianity; some others explore the feelings of alienation among London suburbanites. The stories are well made and caste in the conventional mode.

Samuel Dickson Selvon:

Samuel Dickson Selvon was born on May 20, 1923, in Trinidad—died April 16, 1994, Port of Spain). His writings were mainly flamboyant aura of the life of East Indians living in the West Indies and elsewhere.

His first novel, *A Brighter Sun* (1952), describes East Indians and Creoles in Trinidad, their bigotries and reciprocal doubts, and the effect of this acrimony on a young man. It was the first time that an East Indian author had written with such quiet authority and simple charm about the life of these people. Its sequel, *Turn Again Tiger* (1958), follows the protagonist on a journey to his native soil. In this novel, which is perhaps his best, Selvon made extensive and striking use of dialect. Feroza F. Jussawalla applauds Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* as

"a literary landmark" and acclaims it as unique in "two different respects." He says;

First, and most obviously, it is the first West Indian novel to rely extensively and successfully on West Indian English-not standard English-as the medium of narration, and this is the aspect of Selvon's work most influential for later West Indian novelist. Second, Selvon's novel – as the title shows- is not about the country left behind but about the new reality of life in Britain for the new immigrants from the non-western world." (Jussawalla 101)

His later works include a collection of short stories, *Ways of Sunlight* (1958), and the novels *I Hear Thunder* (1962), *The Housing Lark* (1965), *Moses Ascending* (1975), and *Moses Migrating* (1983), both sequels to *The Lonely Londoners*. *Highway in the Sun* (1991) is a collection of plays.

Ladoo:

Ladoo wrote two great novels—*No Pain Like This Body* (1972) and *Yesterdays* (1974) but after these works while on a visit to Trinidad in 1974, he was murdered. These works explored the rudimentary Indo-Caribbean experience of physical toil, economic hardship, pain, frustration, uncertainty, and entrapment for Indians who came to the Caribbean to replace African slaves who had been freed from British-owned sugar plantations in the 1830s, and Indians in Ladoo's novel still bear the marks of this plantation inheritance, as evidenced by the harsh and demanding circumstances in which his characters are forced to struggle for basic needs.

George Lamming:

George lamming, a post colonial writer was born on the Caribbean islands of Barbados. He belonged to the mixed parentage of the African and American descent. Perchance he is the most famous writer to come forward from the island of Barbados. He worked from 1946 to 1950 as a teacher at El Colegio de Venezuela, a boarding-school for boys in Port of Spain, Trinidad. Though he moved on with his career on the island, like so many West Indian writers he ultimately moved to England in 1950. There, he first worked in a factory and then did broadcasting for the BBC, Lamming became a leader in a Caribbean resurgence in England, along with other émigrés like V.S.Naipaul. Since then he has traveled much, and also served as a visiting faculty at the Universities of Texas and Pennsylvania. He became famous as novelist, critic, and social commentator, and his novel *In The Castle of My Skin* (1953) is one of the classics of West Indian literature.

George Lamming has used the themes of exile, effects of colonialism and the process of decolonization in his novels, and his works also record the black West Indian identity and autonomy. As George Lamming says in *The Pleasures of Exile*,

"The indigenous Carib and Arawak Indians, living by their own lights long before the European adventure, gradually disappear in a blind, wild forest of blood. That mischievous gift, the sugar cane, is introduced, and a fantastic human migration moves to the New World of the Caribbean; deported crooks and criminals, defeated soldiers and Royalist gentlemen fleeing from Europe, slaves from the West Coast of Africa, East Indians, Chinese, Corsicans, and Portuguese. The list is always incomplete, but they all move and meet on an unfamiliar soil, in an unpredictable and infinite range of custom and endeavour, people in the most haphazard combinations, surrounded by memories of splendour and misery, the sad and dying kingdom of Sugar, a future full of promises. And always the sea!" (Lamming 17)

The works of Lamming are a vista of West Indian history with an intense sagacity of patriotism. His *Castle of My Skin* (1953) is somewhat autobiographical in its revelation of the protagonist's developing sense of autonomy and his ensuing separation from the village and folk community. The subsequent migration of the protagonist is told in *The Emigrants* (1954), his homecoming is the centre in *Of Age and Innocence* (1958), and the retrieval of his heritage is the main idea in *Season of Adventure* (1960). His novels focus on the social and economic alteration takes place in the Caribbean, and he uses his protagonists as representative for his own dreams.

"*In the Castle of My Skin*" is an autobiography of Lamming's childhood. It moves through the disintegration of the old plantation system under the control of the new age of nationalism, industrial strife and colonial subjugation.

As early as 1894 in *Kamala*, Krupabai Satthianadhan explored the cultural clash suffered by a Hindu woman who is given a western education in India, and the experience of being caught between two cultures has remained a prominent theme in writings by Indian woman. There are many Indian women writers based in the USA, Canada, Britain, and other parts of the world. Some are recent immigrants, while others, such as Jhumpa Lahiri, are second generation immigrants. These authors write about their situation in cross-cultural contexts - states of 'in-betweenness'.

Lakshmi Persaud:

Lakshmi Persaud's novels express the traditional and cultural legacy of Indians

in Trinidad and also introduce it to the whole world. She was aware that the Indian sensibility was overwhelmingly different, and even though she wrote in English - something she did naturally and with complete simplicity - her novels embody a wholly different mentality, a very Indian world view, feelings and responses. Her novels depict the Indian social scene, the theme of alienation and the social, economic and psychological problems of the modern generation. Generally, diasporic writers have an unreal perception of the conditions existing in real India, and they tend to reconstruct it through the lens of reminiscence or writing about 'imaginary homelands' (Salman Rushdie). Separation leads to the ossification of cultural assemblage, even if the memory is sharp and clear, because the expatriate is not directly in contact with the original India. But Lakshmi Persaud is just contrary to this thinking. She writes with such a great subtlety and accuracy about India where she has never set foot, that the readers feel that they are reading a novel, not by a diasporic writer, but a writer living among Indians strictly following the Indian culture. Her experimental and avant-garde technique of writing is worth praise.

Lakshmi Persaud had a great respect for Indian culture and tradition which become prominent themes in her novels. Her unique capacity to harmonize the rich tradition of different customs, practices, values and beliefs deserve critical acclaim because they constitute the sense of identity of an individual as well as of the community.

The West Indian society is multiethnic, multilingual and multicultural. The people of Trinidad are mainly of African and East Indian descent. In the words of Lakshmi Persaud, "On the Celebration of Trinidad's Indian arrival Day",

"Those who remained harnessed themselves to hard work, at great personal sacrifices saved the economy from collapsing, helped to put it on a sound footing and later contributed in no small measure to social stability and growth of those British West Indian colonies which became their homes." (Persaud, Lakshmi)

Thus Indians as a whole, despite the formidable adversities placed in their way, have been able to retain their sense of identity and dignity and fruitfully preserved and enriched their culture in the post-colonial and post-modern era.

Indian Trinidadians maintain a rural lifestyle whereas the Africans migrated to the urban areas. Ethnic tension and hierarchies were soon established as the Africans developed contempt for rural Indians who in turn despised the Africans for assimilating to Western culture and society so easily.

Lakshmi Persaud's inherent art of story-telling which has its root in the Indian folk tradition as well as the western genre of the novel depicts the challenges faced by Hindu women who grow up in a multi-ethnic island society. This can either mould a female personality or lead to its disintegration.

Her novels have respect for elders and their rule of thumb and morality culled from the Mahabharata and Ramayana, the two great Sanskrit epics which have provided different levels of enlightenment and understanding.

Lakshmi Persaud is a writer of fictions par excellence. She debuted as diasporic Indian English fiction writer with her opus *Butterfly in the Wind* which is an autobiographical novel, written with an existential core of experience, acuteness of observation, accuracy of details and metaphorical allusions. The basic struggle of a psyche responding to the pressures of an intense search for a personality that she experiences from her childhood to the present day, bristles in each line written by this promising Trinidadian writer.

Sastra is the second novel of Lakshmi Persaud written in 1933. It is one of the most compelling existential works in Indian diasporic English fiction. *Sastra* is a moving love story of a young girl growing up within the living traditions of the Hindu way of life with its opportunities, both for spiritual growth and also for restraints which it imposes on the person born into the Trinidadian society in the 1950s with its strong westernizing influence. This novel deals with the perspective of a woman.

The third novel Lakshmi Persaud is *For the Love of my name* written in 2001. It is a political novel.

The fourth novel of Lakshmi Persaud is *Raise the Lantern High* written in 2004. *Raise the Lanterns High* is about women's emancipation, the conflict between modernity and long honoured orthodox traditions set by men. It is an odyssey into the dark, and uncharted hinterland plumbing the perennial problem of Sati plaguing the very existence of women. Lakshmi Persaud bestows the protagonist with the proper courage to encounter the bitter realities of life and eventual resolution to the problem.

Lakshmi Persaud and her fictional characters seem to deem in what Shashi Deshpande has garishly articulated,

We don't reject the ideals, but we know we can't approximate to these pictures of ideal womanhood. And we will not bear any guilt that we

cannot do so. (Deshpande 94)

CONCLUSION:

This paper pens down the literary history of the progenies of the indentured immigrants to the British Caribbean rescuing their odd experiences from the relative anonymity into which the authors believe they have fallen among many modern Caribbeans. The first generation writers of Indian and African heritage, in narrating their stories chronologically and thematically about their indenture forefathers, show a good familiarity with the historical experiences of the immigrants who landed here to relieve the labor crisis in the sugar colonies. These writers have been rightly given the appellation of 'Postcolonial writers', as they all are linked by “(1) shared experience of British imperialism, (2) the use of English in contemporary life and (3) the impact of the literary tradition. These works mostly reflect the tales of destructive, ruthless political power and dispossession—penury, unfairness and banishment, vagrancy, loss of identity and the yearning for liberation and fresh identity. The writers discussed above are mostly from Guyana and Trinidad as most of them especially Indians, were and still are concentrated at these places. Therefore, their writings have mostly characters from Guyana or Trinidad. The most famous writer of Indian descent V.S. Naipaul and Lakshmi Persaud are best known for their adroit depiction of Trinidad which is their birthplace. Their fictions are often autobiographical moving around the themes of alienation, the burdens of the past and the confusions of the present.

The West Indian in Lakshmi Persaud's novels is multiethnic, multilingual and multicultural. The people of Trinidad are mainly of African and East Indian descent. In the words of Lakshmi Persaud, “On the Celebration of Trinidad's Indian Arrival Day”,

“Those who remained harnessed themselves to hard work, at great personal sacrifices saved the economy from collapsing, helped to put it on a sound footing and later contributed in no small measure to social stability and growth of those British West Indian colonies which became their homes.”
(Persaud, Lakshmi)

Thus, Indians as a whole, despite the formidable adversities placed in their way, have been able to retain their sense of identity and dignity and fruitfully preserved and enriched their culture in the post-colonial and post-modern era.

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